

Maitreyi Maheswari Tell me more about *Arcology*. How did you start working on that as a project, both for VR and also in its other iterations?

Peter Burr I'll talk about the broader project, and then I'll talk about VR specifically. When Rhizome reached out to commission that work, they were interested in an accessible version of VR. I am still in this project, thinking about labyrinths as a visual metaphor and as an archetype, which, originally, came in terms of a very personal narrative. My interest came from exploring myself through psychotherapy, but I'm also interested in the power of our art practice to serve a cathartic function. I started thinking about visual metaphors as a way of embedding meaning in a thing that didn't feel illustrative. That started me thinking about the archetype of the labyrinth. On the one hand it's a prehistoric icon, which has this weight that can emerge in many different ways, and on the other it's contemporary, speaking to the contemporary human condition – let's call it technology ... or architecture. I was working on a project that responded to the Andrei Tarkovsky film *Stalker* that envisions the labyrinth as claustrophobia under an open sky. I was really interested in the emotional tone and quality of that. But I extended away from this ruined emptiness and started thinking about the architectural labyrinth, researching works from the middle of the twentieth century that were reacting against modernism. Part of what led me to that was an interest in finding actual works of architecture that looked like hell-scapes. Piranesi (Giovanni Battista Piranesi, 1720–1778) made a series of etchings called *Imaginary Prisons*. They pre-date Escher but have a similar feeling of multicursal chaos.

MM The ruin, this idea of society in decline and the decay of architecture, has a romantic beauty.

PB Yeah, Piranesi was really into ruin porn! He would go to Rome and sketch ruins when he was creating an imaginary prison. I was thinking about architecture as embodying both utopia and a dystopia. That felt like really fruitful ground. *Arcology* comes from that exploration, and from personal experience of navigating the mental health industry. There is this inescapable disorientation that, for anyone who has experienced depression, felt truthful. But I was also combining my experience of living in major cities with the experience of being in virtual space.

MM Labyrinths also form the archetype for computer game architecture. Games are something that players choose to escape into as well. How has that fed into the construction of the work?

PB I come from a film-making background: film has a beginning and there is an end. Interactive technology holds the same promise as video games. The maze or the labyrinth becomes a way to visualise a multicursal narrative experience, where you have variant endings. One maze path will have caustic slime-fuck that will kill you; in the other there will be a sharp-jawed trap, or maybe there will be a positive ending. I started to explore the tools used to make games, but *Arcology* is not an interactive work. It's a 360 video, so it's unicursal, but it evokes other things. It can speak towards the video game labyrinth without actually containing its formal qualities of narrative design.

MM In terms of narrative, one of the aspects of your piece is an exploration of space, both inside and outside the body. The work builds moments of surprise and tension. Are you trying to create a sense of emotional investment as you might in film-making? Do you think of VR as being a narrative medium in that way?



PB Definitely, and my background in experimental animation and film allows this disciplinary crossover into 360 spatial storytelling. It becomes another site to explore. I think about the time-based quality of any medium, whether it's comics, video games, film. That's important to engage

with because, with 360 video or VR, you have somebody's devoted attention – and what are you going to do with that? I feel a sense of responsibility and respect to the audience. With 360 video, we have this whole space with which to tell the story. How do you get someone to turn around if you

are going to tell a story in another part of the space? When I am engaging in a VR experience, I often like to look where I feel that the director is not expecting me to – at the details. I would criticise a lot of mainstream VR, if there is such a thing, for pushing the user into roles for the user that are not actually the ways I enjoy using this technology.

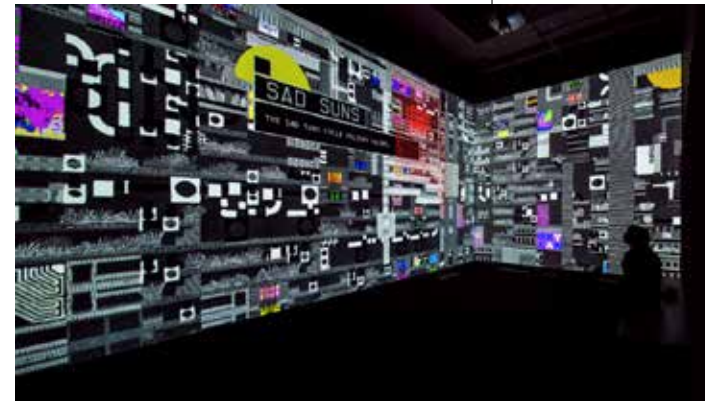
MM What are the broader challenges of working with a new technology like this?

PB I'm going to show a piece called *DIRTSCRAPER* (2018) in a group show at bitforms gallery [New York] next week and, with a programmer, I am adapting it for the specifics of the show. We are partnering with this platform which is delivering a digital, interactive, virtual 360 video experience where users will be able to navigate the space and be able to click on aspects of it. That was what I started developing the piece to engage with, but in the end it was not actually viable. This highlighted some of the challenges of working in a technological space, aka working with a shared hallucination of what technology actually is. I'm an artist, someone who is trying to make meaningful,

poetic, emotional work on a scaffold of non-existent promises, and it can become a really damaging process.

MM There is so much to anticipate and predict when working at the edges of new technology: you are basically writing science fiction.

PB The ethos of my work emerges from DIY culture, punk culture and zine culture, and I think a lot about the importance of



these fundamentals: making work that's logical, making work that's self-sustainable and making work that's scalable. *Arcology* ended up being a 360 video; it's not actually VR. It had the potential to be VR, but because of the limitations in the framework of that particular commission it

was guided into the shape of what you guys presented at Zabłudowicz Collection.

MM What concerns you most when you are thinking about how audiences will experience your work, whether it is a 360 video in a head-mounted display or more broadly the animation and film work you make?

PB Just this week I took part in an event the National Endowment for the Arts put together, where digital artists came together to talk about what it's like to be professional in this space right now. One of the recurring themes was that many galleries just don't have the training or education to know how to present virtual reality or work that uses complicated technology. I am particularly interested in the nature of the pixel: whether it is a head-mounted display or a wall-mounted display or a projector, there's a matrix with light shining through

it, and so there are different ways in which an installation can highlight the essential nature of that technology. It's challenging to create the perfect conditions for showing a technology-based work, so I always find it pretty important to be generous and flexible in working with a venue. Often it requires a month of labour for me to adapt a piece for a specific presentation, which is really quite expensive, right? This is a very broad topic – the nature of an artwork being able to blend and shift. It's about working with what is available. And being too much of a purist means eliminating the audience completely, and what is art without an audience? It's nothing.

MM One of the things that is really interesting about experiencing *Arcology* with the head-mounted display is how your visual language takes on a whole different dimension, because it's already trippy and psychedelic. When you are in a 360 environment it can be overwhelming – we definitely had instances of people needing to sit down!

PB The head-mounted display is a really great venue for flicker film and stroboscopic media, because viewers tend not to look for the content or the meaning, but allow it to operate on them – that's where the beauty starts to emerge. In a cinema you can look away, you can look down when the film is getting too intense, but with a head-mounted display you are in there. It presses you even more to break through that barrier of losing control a bit, allowing the VR to operate on you. It kind of cracks into the black box of our brain and our bodies. I recognise that's not for everyone.

In terms of my process of getting into this, I can say that the first time I remember making digital art, or computer-based art, was in the 1990s, on an Apple computer with a black and white monitor, using



software called MacPaint. It was a very low-resolution display, with only black and white pixels. One of the things I really enjoyed was playing with the different fill patterns, because there was no colour or even grey. The way you sculpted dimension, depth, volume, was through mixing these different fill patterns. Over the past decade I've experimented with the things I enjoyed with that software and that technology, but applying it to different environments, different technologies – updating it, if you will.

MM Your work has such a distinctive visual presence. I am curious about how you work with new technologies and new media without falling into some kind of nostalgia for the history of these things.

PB My interest in these aesthetics, sensibilities and processing tools is not nostalgic. It is not about referencing a pre-existing style; rather, it's about committing to using these older tools and learning new things that I can do with them because of advances in technology. I am just careful of the internet in terms of research or as an outlet for framing my projects, because I think that is a place where nostalgia, or a superficial reading, is encouraged.

MM How does collaboration feature in your work?

PB It's hard to generalise, because it varies. With *Arcology*, different members of my artistic practice manifested that work in various degrees. Somebody I have collaborated with for many years, John Also Bennett, did the sound design. He is a friend, and therefore our collaboration is quite organic. Mark Fingerhut is the programmer I worked with. From these collaborations a bunch of topics and experiments emerged and have ended up finding their way to a subsequent ongoing project called *Pattern Language*. I have also worked with a writer named Porpentine, and those text elements ended up moving into the *DIRTSCRAPER* piece. I often conceptualise my practice as an object, this big, messy, chunky tube, and if any discrete artwork emerges from it, it is just a slice of that. You know, you can strata-cut it and give it a name, for example *Arcology*.

MM For me, one of the exciting things about how artists use these technologies, as opposed to film-makers or game designers, is the attention they pay to the formal properties of how things have shifted, how you can push the limits of what you are making based on the limits on what you are showing. You almost want to push the technology and what it can do to breaking point.

PB Yeah, it's fun, and there is a sense of urgency. I feel forced to embrace the fact that these technologies are built on a framework of erasing their own past, of outdating themselves. Consequently, when you are paying attention to formal details, the work is kind of volatile in a way that feels exciting, but that creates all these problems, like archiving and making a version of something that will hopefully survive past my lifetime. Nobody can say

with any certainty that that will actually happen. I've been committed to this digital discipline for the past twenty years, I've put a lot of energy into it and got excited about it, and having a voice within it is an ongoing process. Utopia is a process.

